

AUDIO

FAQ

Q Is there anything I can do to improve my MP3 player's sound?

A Your first step should be to experiment with your player's equalisation presets or try some custom settings if available. If you still can't get a sound that you like, listen to the same music files on your PC. If they sound equally poor, you may need to buy or create files with a higher bit rate.

Make several versions of two or three test tracks using different settings on your ripping program. Compare the results, listening for detail and high-end clarity. Tracks with plenty of cymbals tend to show up digital artefacts best.

If you still aren't happy with your player's sound, invest in some better earphones. Most of the MP3 players in this month's Labs test on page 86 would be improved by one of the four pairs reviewed on these pages. We've also reviewed six sets of speakers, three of which are great for music.

Simon Handby

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TERRATEC Aureon 7.1 PCI

★★★★★
£30 inc VAT

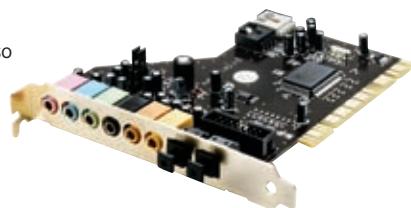
Most modern PCs can produce a 5.1 channel surround-sound output, but only via three stereo analogue audio sockets. Few computers can output a digital signal suitable for the Dolby Digital decoder in a home cinema setup, and until now no suitable upgrades have been available.

Terratec's Aureon 7.1 PCI is the first sound card we've seen with Dolby Digital Live encoding, which converts any audio created by the PC into an AC-3 bitstream output.

This works regardless of the application generating sound, so your software doesn't need to be Dolby-compliant. Although the card has analogue outputs for 7.1 channel audio, Dolby Digital Live supports a maximum of 5.1 channels.

The Aureon comes with little in the way of bundled software, but this makes it easy to install and unobtrusive. Digital sound quality was fine, but the analogue output wasn't any clearer than our onboard Realtek chip. This card is great value if you need a Dolby Digital output from your PC. However, we wouldn't recommend it otherwise.

Simon Handby



SUMMARY

- ✓ Unique Dolby Live support
- ✓ Very affordable
- ✗ Average analogue quality

SOUND CARD Line, mic, aux and optical S/PDIF inputs, four line (7.1) outputs, optical S/PDIF output, MIDI port (on riser card), PCI interface
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net>

APPLE iPod Hi-Fi

★★★
£226 inc VAT

There are more iPod speaker docks than you can shake a stick at, but before the arrival of the iPod Hi-Fi it seemed Apple was content to leave them to third parties.

The iPod Hi-Fi's design is a matter of taste, but the unadorned, weighty block does feel well put together. Its only controls are the volume buttons, but it comes with an infrared remote control that controls a docked iPod. There's no data connector, so you can't

synchronise your iPod while it's docked, though. You can connect an alternative audio source via a combined line input and S/PDIF miniplug at the rear.

The Hi-Fi uses mains power or six D-cell batteries, but it's heavy and its three speaker drivers are too lightly guarded for portable use. It has plenty of bass, but it lacks detail at high frequencies.

The iPod Hi-Fi may be the official speaker dock, but it's as expensive and disappointing as much of the competition. We'd recommend a cheaper dock such as Logitech's mm50 or spending more on a quality amplifier and speakers.

Simon Handby



SUMMARY

- ✓ Well made
- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Loud output lacks clarity

IPOD SPEAKER DOCK Stereo portable speakers, S/PDIF miniplug/line input and iPod dock PART CODE M9867Z/A
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk

Also consider...

SENNHEISER PXC 250

★★★★★
£70 inc VAT

BEST BUY These headphones use active electronics to cancel out environmental sounds. They don't do much to reduce unwelcome speech or music, but they are astonishingly effective on a plane or train. They sound great, with plenty of bass, and are comfortable to wear. Aside from their bulky battery case, these headphones are ideal for travel.



HEADPHONES Stereo-active noise-cancelling headphones, frequency response 10-21,000Hz, sensitivity 106dB
PART CODE PXC 250
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

- ✓ Reduce background noise
 - ✗ Bulky battery case
- FULL REVIEW Dec 2005

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★
£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY Logitech's X-230 were the most affordable 2.1 channel speakers in our recent Labs test, but they sounded better than much more expensive competitors. Each satellite's drivers are visible through a cloth net covering, while the compact subwoofer is protected by a sturdy metal grille.

These speakers could do with a second audio input, longer cables and an easy to reach bass level control, but they're outstanding for this price. Though not amazingly loud, they look superb and produce detailed and balanced sound.

2.1 SPEAKERS line input, 32W RMS power
PART CODE 970123-0120
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Excellent sound
✗ Only one input FULL REVIEW Apr 2006



CREATIVE GigaWorks G500

★★★★★
£148 inc VAT

BEST BUY Creative's high-end set of 5.1 speakers give prominence to bass and treble frequencies that make for heart-pounding action in games. Each satellite speaker is rated at 36W, while the dual-ported subwoofer is capable of delivering 130W of crisp bass.

They produce wonderfully balanced and detailed music, and are worth the high price.

5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs plus aux input, 310W RMS power
PART CODE 51MF4040AA001
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com> ✓ Produce clearly defined sound ✓ Auxiliary input is on the sub FULL REVIEW Apr 2006



CREATIVE GigaWorks T20

★★★★★

£61 inc VAT

Creative's GigaWorks T20 speakers are designed for people without the room or inclination for a subwoofer. The two-way magnetically shielded speakers are rated at 14W each. The right-hand unit contains an amplifier and 3.5mm jack sockets for headphones and two audio inputs. Its metal volume, bass and treble controls feel sturdy and expensive.

The speakers are loud enough for most bedrooms or studies and have a natural sound. They don't have as much bass power as a good 2.1 setup, but top-facing bass reflex ports help to fortify their bottom end without unbalancing it like a subwoofer can. They're a good choice if you need a compact speaker with excellent music quality and can live without earth-shaking volume.

Simon Handby



STEREO SPEAKERS Line input plus aux input, 14W RMS per channel **PART CODE** 51MF1545AA002
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>
☒ Natural sounding; well made; two inputs
☒ Not amazingly loud or bassy

SENNHEISER HD 415

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT

Sennheiser's HD 415 headphones are too big to travel well, but they're well suited to listening in the home. They come with three metres of cable leading to the left side only, and a cable winder that helps keep any excess tidy. The headphones have a 3.5mm stereo jack, but Sennheiser supplies a screw-on 1/4" adaptor suitable for most hi-fi equipment.

The HD 415s require a louder input than many of our reference headphones, but most quality MP3 players will drive them comfortably. They produce clear treble, but we found they needed a gentle bass boost to round out their bottom end. These headphones have plenty of padding and are comfortable to wear. We've heard better, but they perform strongly for an entry-level pair.

Simon Handby



STEREO HEADPHONES 18-19,000Hz, sensitivity 110dB
PART CODE HD415
SUPPLIER www.hughesdirect.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk
☒ Very comfy; long lead; good value
☒ Basic sound

SENNHEISER CX 300

★★★★★

£27 inc VAT

Most MP3 players come with earphones that sit in the outer ear. Because they don't make an air-tight seal, sound is free to leak out around them, which means that people in close proximity will be treated to the tinny sound of your music. In-ear headphones such as these Sennheisers or the pair supplied with Philips' GoGear Jukebox (see page 94) block environmental sound and let you listen at lower volumes.

For such small earphones, the CX 300s produce an astonishing amount of bass. They sound full and detailed, but we found their high mid-range to be overpowering at loud volumes and they could become tiring. They're more comfortable to wear than many other in-ear pairs we've tried, but we still prefer noise-cancelling headphones such as Sennheiser's own PXC 250 (see 'Also consider...', below left).

Simon Handby



STEREO EARPHONES 18-21,000Hz, sensitivity 112dB
PART CODE CX300
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk
☒ Comfy and affordable; plenty of bass
☒ More tiring than noise-cancelling headphones

GEAR4 PocketParty V2

★

£22 inc VAT

We weren't that enamoured of the original PocketParty, which we awarded one star back in *Shopper* June 2005. Undaunted, Gear4 has released a second version. The PocketParty V2 connects with an iPod's dock interface rather than plugging into any 3.5mm audio socket, so it can be used only with dockable iPods.

The iPod's line output is at a constant volume, so the PocketParty has a two-position boost switch. The Plus mode introduced distortion until we followed Gear4's advice to use the iPod's Bass Reducer EQ setting; the Minus mode makes it almost too quiet.

Sound quality on this new set of speakers has been marginally improved over the original Pocket Party, but it is still tinny. Your money would be much better spent on a headphone splitter cable and a second pair of earphones.

Simon Handby



IPOD SPEAKERS Stereo speakers, iPod dock interface, 1W RMS
SUPPLIER www.ipodworld.co.uk
DETAILS www.gear4.com
☒ Better than the first version
☒ Works only with iPods; poor sound quality

IXOS XMM628 Subwoofer Speaker System

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT

We reviewed six sets of 2.1 channel speakers in our Labs test in *Shopper* April 2006. Three sets, including Logitech's X-230 (see 'Also consider...', opposite), cost less than £35, so is it worth paying £40 for these speakers from IXOS?

The XMM628s certainly look snazzy, with bright white enclosures and drivers. The satellites are lightly guarded by clear plastic, but the open subwoofer has to be positioned carefully to avoid damage from an errant toe.

These speakers are loud and sound as bright as they look, with plenty of clear treble. The subwoofer produces crisp bass and, with only 12W, it doesn't overpower the 10W satellites. The XMM628s sound decent, but the X-230s are cheaper and have a headphone socket.

Simon Handby



2.1 SPEAKERS Stereo phono inputs, 32W RMS
PART CODE XMM628
SUPPLIER www.thehifistore.co.uk
DETAILS www.ixos.co.uk
☒ Look interesting; good sound
☒ Bit too bright; no headphone socket

KOSS PortaPro

★★★★★

£35 inc VAT

It's hard to don Koss's PortaPro headphones without first putting on some rollerskates and a pair of legwarmers. Their design has hardly changed since their introduction in 1984, and is now something of a classic. The PortaPros' overlapping headband design adjusts quickly for different head sizes and lets them collapse down easily for compact storage.

Whether or not you're a fan of their retro looks, it's hard not to be impressed with the PortaPros' output. They have a wide frequency range and respond with gusto to moderate volumes. The headphones' sound is detailed and natural, but they produce a huge amount of warm bass that may not suit all tastes, and their open drivers leak a lot of sound.

Simon Handby



STEREO HEADPHONES 15-25,000Hz, sensitivity 101dB
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.koss.com
☒ Detailed; bassy output; comfy; look funky
☒ Leak lots of sound; a little pricy